

FIG. 6.

gretchen no. 6

mental hiccups

it might be ocd

Being as this is about mental disorders, it could be triggering to those who have ocd or other mental conditions.



I could probably fill three or four of these little booklets talking about my mind. There have been many times in the past year that I've wondered what happened to my mind, why I was making some of the choices I was making and why it sometimes

felt as if I was losing it. I don't have the answers but I've been putting the pieces together.

It's about 10:30 at night & you're going to bed. The next day is a workday so you know that you have to set the alarm. You look over at the nightstand & pick up the small red plastic time-telling device & flick the "alarm on" switch to the left. The little light on the clock face telling you that you are now guarded against oversleeping comes on.

But instead of laying down to go to sleep you push the button that tells you what time the alarm is set for, just in case it's not set for the right time even though it hasn't been touched since you last set it. It reads 6:00, that's the right time.

You sit it down on the nightstand & get the feeling that something might've happened to the buttons on the way from your hands to the dresser that turned the alarm off. So you flick the switch again & say, "The time is 10:01 p.m. & the alarm is set for 6 a.m." Click.

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You do this several more times until you don't have that worried feeling in your chest that screams at you from inside until you appease the gods.

Or the devils.



You do this every night.

The next morning you wake up & get ready for work. You use a flat iron on your hair & the iron to unwrinkle your clothes in the process. You're ready to walk out of the door but you have things that you have to check first. So you walk to the bathroom &

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count the plugs, taking notice that nothing is still plugged up. You put a finger to the hair iron to make sure it's not still hot. It's cool, but even so you check to make sure that there is nothing sitting on the counter around it, so that nothing can catch on fire.

Then you walk through the kitchen & check the socket where you'd plugged in the iron. It's bare. As with the flat iron you put a finger to that iron to make sure it's cool & then move all papers & other items away from the machine. You rarely put the iron in the cabinet because as long as it's out you can touch it to make sure it's not hot.

On the way out you count your cats to make sure that none have escaped to the outside world. That would be disaster. You've seen too many squashed felines on the road in your life to allow that to happen to one of your kittens.

"One, two, three." They're never in the same place so you have to walk through the house to find them. While you're doing that you can't remember if you checked

the bathroom iron. Deep down you know you did but you still have to check it again just to *make sure*.

Some days this is the end of your morning time wasting rituals.

Some days it isn't. On the days when you're really, really having trouble-like when you leave the house you still have that feeling that you've forgotten to do something major that might end in your house burning down while you're at work, you turn around halfway down the road to go back. Check things again & then get to work five minutes late. But at least you knew that that iron was cut off. You tell yourself that it was stupid to go back just to check things when you **KNOW** that everyday you go through the same ritual before you leave the house & that nothing could've been overlooked or you wouldn't have even walked out the door, but you had to do it. You had to do it so that that knot, that feeling that something was

wrong in the pit of your stomach would go away. If you didn't your day would be full of anxiety that you needed to hurry home after work & make sure everything was all right.

Maybe this wasn't you & maybe you've never had any kind of pattern that you had to follow but it was me for years.

Sometimes as I read up on the characteristics of people who have been diagnosed with OCD, or obsessive-compulsive disorder, I try to remember things that I did as a child that might've fit into the definition in an attempt to see when I started doing things.

I remember counting. Counting the squares on sidewalks & the number of steps I took as I walked around the farm on which I grew up. If I forgot to count a step or messed up the counting I'd have to start over because of the same feeling I got when I didn't think I'd checked something. There was a long drive from my dad's house to my mom's house, or at least it

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seemed long. As my stepmother drove us home on Sundays from our weekend visits I would pretend my eyes were large chainsaws cutting down the trees alongside the road through the window. I would move my eyes so that they didn't "cut" the electric line posts. If by some chance my eyes didn't move fast enough I would get a chill in my spine as though I'd done something wrong. I was part pretending that I was a tree cutter, part feeding some need I had to look at only the trees & make my eyes shift over the posts. . .

Years went by & I went along my merry way checking & counting things & not really thinking anything of it. I didn't know much about mental disorders, I'd only heard of depression, schizophrenia, and illnesses such as that. I knew that it wasn't really normal to have to count or touch something to make the discomfort go away, but since it was never a major problem I didn't talk to anyone about it.

After I graduated with my bachelor's I was hired as a protective services worker. My

job was to go into homes to investigate complaints of child abuse and neglect. Most of the cases that were called in were that there was no food or the homes were dirty.

My very first case involved going to the oldest project development in town to see if the apartment was dirty (inadequate shelter) & if there was no food (inadequate food) as the complainant had alleged. The mother's name was Janice & there were two children living in the home. The complainant was pretty much right, the apartment was dirty. I couldn't believe people were living in that fashion. The fridge didn't work at all. The freezer door was lined with dead cockroaches. There was white dog crap on the floor of the living room, meaning it had been there for a while, & overall it was just nasty. It made my skin crawl & worse was that I had to sit down or seem impolite. The "seasoned" caseworker that went out with me on the call had sat down first so I followed.

I left feeling extremely dirty, as though being in that room with the bugs & the shit had somehow contaminated my hair, my clothes, and my skin. Back at the office I used some anti-bacterial lotion for my hands, but it would be hours until I could shower. Long hours spent thinking about the dirtiness I'd encountered & wondering if I was going to catch something as a result of breathing it in.



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I worked in many a dirty house during the year and a half I was at that job. I would go into these places with the rotting food on the counters, the dirty diapers lying in the floor, the animal feces five feet from the children's beds, & each time leaving feeling like I wanted to peel a layer off of skin just to get rid of the germs. I knew that since I wasn't touching or eating anything there wasn't really that much chance of something happening to me but in my mind, I was a walking germ factory once I left the places. And the feeling of unease was so great, the moment I got back to the office I'd wash. I started carrying around a small bottle of germ-killing gel for my hands, which helped but I still had been exposed in other ways, like my face & my clothes had still been in the same air with the filth & the gel couldn't kill the funk on those with gel.

I would go home with the same feeling that I was contaminated until I got in the shower. I would then imagine the germs falling off my body & out of my hair as

they dropped to the shower floor & swirled down the drain. Then, and only then did I feel clean. I had to imagine them leaving my body though. Otherwise it was wasted shower time.

I left this job & began work as a teacher, thinking I'd be able to shed the compulsions that I'd been feeding through the CPS job. My first year I was assigned to work in a special ed. preschool class, or I thought. I ended up working with the special ed. kindergarten students, which ended up being a blessing in disguise. These kids were older & already toilet trained.

The children that I worked with ended up coming to school dirty most of the time & one of them, probably the student I held the closest to my heart because of his home situation, had a problem that made it hard for him to breathe. He also had major sinus trouble & thick, yellow mucus would roll out of his nose all the time. I could not bring myself to wipe his nose or help him with this. He was 7 years old & part of the reason for my not wiping it for

twelve

him was I wanted him to learn to take care of himself. The other reason was that I didn't want to go anywhere near his face when it was covered in either crust or fresh snot, & it wasn't because I just felt like that was gross because I didn't really have a weak stomach. I just felt like there were too many germs & I knew I'd spend the rest of the day in near panic about having possibly gotten some of his mucus on my hands.

And so I'd go home & shower, in my head picturing the germ-water rinsing away from my body so that I could feel better.

I've never been one who was able to show lots of random affection towards strangers or friends, such as when you just hug someone, but once I started feeling like being in the presence of dirty clothes, homes, and children was going to contaminate me it became so that I couldn't really touch the children. Some teachers are very touchy-feeling with their young students, & I just couldn't bring myself to be that way, even if just to give

them a pat on the shoulder. From time to time I would do hug one or touch them on the shoulder to tell them they did a good job, but I didn't let them sit on my lap or otherwise hang over me. I wanted to hug them sometimes, like the little boy with all the mucus, but the discomfort I knew I'd feel afterwards outweighed that desire. And that sometimes made me sad. I was still a good teacher; I showed them that I cared in other ways, just nothing physical.

In the years that followed I worked with students in grades 1-3. Nothing really changed. I think that my principal wanted me to be more touchy-feely with the kids, but I just couldn't do it.



I remember the first year I had a large class of 13 students I'd become so afraid of something bad happening to them on the playground or someone kidnapping one from out of the woods that for the first couple of days of school when I was outside at recess with them I counted them repeatedly. One to thirteen for about thirty minutes straight. It wracked my nerves so badly that for the rest of the year I let my aide take them outside alone. I did not want to count all year long & I knew that I would because I wanted to keep control over their safety since I was responsible.

I also feel as though I need to have things a certain way. My desk is one example. My calendar has to be in the middle of the desktop, & it has to be one of the large ones or I can't have one at all. My pencil holder has to be in the top left corner alongside the stapler & anything else that I have. If anything is out of place I have to fix it immediately or my insides start going on their own roller coaster ride. There have been times that my aide has picked

up something to use (which I have a hard time with anyway) & put it back in the wrong place & I could just scream at her stupidity. But it's not really stupidity; those things just don't bother most people. She had no idea what was going on inside my head, I was that good at hiding it from most people.

I can't just get out of my car, put my keys in my purse, & go inside the store. I have to check repeatedly in my purse to make sure that the keys are there. Sometimes half a dozen times before the shopping is over & I go back to the car.

While I could hide it from most people I wasn't able to hide it from everyone. I had an ex-boyfriend who didn't understand mental disorders. In fact he strongly discouraged my ideas about seeing someone to obtain medication for depression. I don't think he believed that many mental disorders were real. There were times when he made comments about my excessive checking of locks, frons, and stoves. I suppose it was

frustrating to not be able to leave because I wanted to go touch the irons or count the cats, but it was something that I had to do or else panic about the things I needed to check until I got home. Got home & checked, that is.

Sometimes my co-workers would say things to me about my germ-killer, but since so many people used it really wasn't a big deal. More like a joke of some sort. One of my aides found it amusing that I spent so much time trying to disinfect items in the classroom such as books, markers, & door handles. I would laugh at myself. I knew it was sort of silly but I wasn't able to stop.

I don't like having to carry out these behaviors. They make me late for work, they cause me to seem cold & indifferent at times, & they bring me shame. But all that is outweighed by the alternative.

I've tried to find a simple way of explaining how a brain like mine works as far as OCD. The best thing I heard, & this might be totally wrong but it does seem to

make sense, was by a doctor doing research on the subject. He explained as a person without ocd's brain telling them to do something, they do it & that's the end of it. A person with ocd's brain will tell them to do the same thing, they do it, but the brain doesn't stop giving them the command. That's how it feels, like a hiccup in my mind.

I have not been formally diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder. If I do not have it then I definitely have some of its major characteristics. I have given thought to seeing a psychiatrist, but when I get the guts to call I either get an answering service or some other obstacle gets in the way of actually making an appointment. I'm not sure what a shrink can do for me anyway other than prescribe pills. I already take an anti-depressant/anti-anxiety medicine; I might end up a total zombie.




I suppose there is some sort of behavior modification therapy that could be done but I'm terrified of trying to not do the things that have become a way of life for me for so long. These compulsions are like the friend you have that really gets on your nerves, but they're always there to make you feel better when you need them.

Maybe now you
understand.

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P.S. I am not crazy.



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